

APRIL 29, 1976

CANAL TALKS SITUATIONER

ANNCR:

FROM PANAMA, VOA CORRESPONDENT AL ORTIZ EXAMINES HOW THE POLITICAL DEBATE IN THE UNITED STATES ON THE PANAMA CANAL ISSUE HAS AFFECTED THE NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE U.S. AND PANAMA ON A NEW CANAL TREATY.

VOICE:

THE CONTINUING DEBATE ABOUT THE CANAL BETWEEN PRESIDENT FORD AND HIS CHALLENGER FOR THE REPUBLICAN PARTY NOMINATION, RONALD REAGAN, HAS BROUGHT THE ISSUE INTO THE OPEN IN THE UNITED STATES. U.S. CITIZENS ARE LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE CANAL, AND THE NEGOTIATIONS TO REPLACE THE 1903 TREATY. SO FAR, THE HEATED EXCHANGES BETWEEN MISTER REAGAN AND PRESIDENT FORD DO NOT APPEAR TO HAVE AFFECTED THE CONTINUING NEGOTIATIONS, BUT IT HAS CAUSED SOME CONCERN AMONG PANAMANIAN.

LAST MONTH, PANAMANIAN LEADER GENERAL OMAR TORRIJOS SAID THE STEADY PROGRESS OF THE NEGOTIATIONS WAS BEING SLOWED BY THE DEBATE GOING ON IN THE UNITED STATES. PANAMA'S NEWLY NAMED FOREIGN MINISTER AQUILINO BOYD, SAID THIS WEEK THAT THE NEGOTIATIONS SHOULD BE INTENSIFIED AND COMPLETED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. CARLOS LOPEZ GUEVARA, A MEMBER OF THE PANAMANIAN NEGOTIATING TEAM, SAYS PANAMA REALIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF AN OPEN DISCUSSION OF THE PANAMA CANAL ISSUE IN THE U.S. ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN. BUT, HE SAYS, THE UNITED STATES CANNOT FORGET ITS COMMITMENT TO PANAMA TO REACH A PROMPT AGREEMENT. BOTH U.S. AND PANAMANIAN OFFICIALS SAY A DRAFT TREATY SHOULD BE READY NEXT YEAR.

IT WOULD THEN BE SUBMITTED TO THE U.S. SENATE FOR APPROVAL, AND THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT WOULD SUBMIT THE DRAFT TO A POPULAR REFERENDUM.

BUT THERE IS A LOT OF GROUND TO COVER BEFORE THAT STEP. THE TWO COUNTRIES STILL ARE TRYING TO WORK OUT THE BASIC IDEAS THAT WILL BE WRITTEN INTO A DRAFT TREATY. MISTER LOPEZ GUEVARA SAYS U.S. AMBASSADOR ELLSWORTH BUNKER IS EXPECTED TO VISIT PANAMA IN EARLY MAY FOR ANOTHER ROUND OF TOP LEVEL NEGOTIATIONS. THE TECHNICAL TEAMS OF THE TWO COUNTRIES HAVE MET FOR SEVERAL WEEKS, AND THEY APPEAR TO BE CLOSER TO AN AGREEMENT ON THE QUESTION OF LANDS AND WATERS; THAT IS HOW MUCH OF THE CANAL ZONE WILL THE U.S. CONTINUE TO HOLD UNDER TERMS OF THE NEW TREATY. THAT INCLUDES THE QUESTION OF THE U.S. MILITARY BASES IN THE ZONE. GENERAL TORRIJOS HAS EXPRESSED PANAMA'S DESIRE TO REDUCE THE U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE SOON AFTER A TREATY IS RATIFIED AND SIGNED. BUT IT NOW APPEARS THAT THE MILITARY PRESENCE WILL NOT BE REDUCED SHARPLY WHILE THE U.S. CONTINUES TO HAVE THE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR DEFENSE OF THE WATERWAY.

A MORE BASIC ISSUE, FROM THE PANAMANIAN POINT OF VIEW, IS THE QUESTION OF THE DURATION OF THE TREATY; II. OTHER WORDS, HOW LONG BEFORE PANAMA HAS FULL CONTROL OVER THE CANAL AND ITS ADJACENT ZONE? PANAMA DOES NOT WANT THE TREATY TO EXTEND BEYOND THE YEAR TWO THOUSAND. PRESIDENT FORD HAS SAID THE U.S. WANTS TO NEGOTIATE A TREATY THAT WILL PROTECT U.S. INTERESTS IN THE AREA OVER THE NEXT THIRTY TO FIFTY YEARS. NO FINAL AGREEMENT IS NEAR ON THIS POINT.

FOR THE EMPLOYEES OF THE PANAMA CANAL COMPANY, WHO LIVE AND WORK IN THE ZONE, A MAJOR ISSUE IS THE FUTURE OF THEIR JOBS. THERE WAS A FIVE-DAY WORK SLOWDOWN LAST MONTH BY CANAL COMPANY EMPLOYEES TO PROTEST PROPOSED CHANGES IN SALARY SCALES. CANAL COMPANY OFFICIALS SAID THE EMPLOYEES WERE EXPRESSING THEIR CONCERN OVER THE NEGOTIATIONS AND THEIR JOB SECURITY. U.S. OFFICIALS SAY THE CANAL EMPLOYEES NEED CERTAIN PROTECTIONS AND JOB GUARANTEES TO DIMINISH THEIR FEAR OF THE FUTURE.

UNITED STATES OFFICIALS FEEL THE DEBATE IN THE U.S. HAS SERVED TO INFORM THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE NEGOTIATIONS. BUT THE OFFICIALS SAY THE NEGOTIATIONS HAVE DEVELOPED THEIR OWN MOMENTUM, AND THAT REGARDLESS OF THE POLITICAL DEBATE, THE MOMENTUM OF THE TALKS MUST BE MAINTAINED.

GH/PSM